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ABSTRACT

This report reviews the activities of a workshop on violence and the American family that was conducted to consider the nexus between research and policy issues in the field, identify key issues that need to be addressed in responding to the problem of family violence, and highlight program initiatives to address the problem. It lists workshop participants and outlines key issues in regard to the dimensions of family violence, existing interventions, and policies, programs, and research directions. The report then identifies key elements of programs that can address the full range of issues, including social services, health, and criminal justice concerns. It concludes by advocating three steps that can be taken to address the problem of family violence in America: (1) development of a public education campaign that would foster understanding of the complex dimensions of family violence; (2) development of rigorous evaluations of public-sector programs designed to treat or reduce the incidence of child and spousal abuse and abuse of the elderly; and (3) integration of preventive measures for family violence into a comprehensive, community-based program of family support services. (MDM)

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Violence and the American Family

Report of a Workshop

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Violence and the American Family

Report of a Workshop

Rosemary Chalk, Editor

Board on Children and Families

Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education
National Research Council

and

Institute of Medicine

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This report has been reviewed by a group other than the authors according to procedures approved by a Report Review Committee consisting of members of the National Academy of Sciences, the National Academy of Engineering, and the Institute of Medicine.

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Preface

The Workshop on Violence and the American Family, held May 11-13, 1993, was one in a series of meetings on current and emerging child and family policy issues organized by the National Forum on the Future of Children and Families (now incorporated into the Board on Children and Families). A joint project of the National Research Council's Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education and the Institute of Medicine, the forum was established in 1987 to promote an ongoing dialogue among scholars and experts in children and family issues and leaders in government, business, philanthropy, and the media.

An advisory group, chaired by Margaret Heagarty, director of pediatrics of Harlem Hospital Center in New York City and member of the National Forum, organized the workshop. Other advisory group members were Lucy Berliner, director of research, Harborview Sexual Assault Center in Seattle; Richard Gelles, director of the Family Violence Research Program, University of Rhode Island; Jill Korbin, associate professor of anthropology, Case Western Reserve University; Lawrence Sherman, professor of criminology, University of Maryland; and Rosemary Chalk, senior program officer, Board on Children and Families, National Research Council.

Thirty-five participants met for three days at the Wingspread Conference Center in Racine, Wisconsin, to discuss the topic of violence and the American family and to assess the quality of research in this field. In order to stimulate a broad review of the issues associated with family violence, workshop participants were selected from a variety of institutional and disciplinary backgrounds. Participants were drawn from the communities of researchers, service providers, and policy makers, whose perspectives on

the topic of family violence (also termed "intimate violence") may vary. Expert opinions may also be affected by the forms of violence under examination and the setting in which program efforts are structured (federal, state, or local; urban or rural). Workshop participants included physicians and other health professionals, research scientists from the social and behavioral sciences, social workers, judges, lawyers, a district attorney, a police official, and service providers from a battered women's shelter in Wisconsin. Federal agencies represented at the workshop included the National Institute of Mental Health, the National Institute on Aging, the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the National Institute of Justice. City and state officials from Boston, New York City, St. Louis, and Milwaukee also participated in the meeting.

Efforts are now under way to examine the proposals outlined in this report. Such efforts are based in the Board on Children and Families, a joint activity of the Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education of the National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine.

Support for the workshop was provided by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and The Johnson Foundation of Racine, Wisconsin, whose generous assistance is gratefully acknowledged.

Sheldon White, *Chair*
Board on Children and Families

Introduction

The issue of family violence has captured the attention of a broad range of professional, political, and social organizations. Media reports of various types of family violence—parental beatings of young children, spousal attacks that result in severe physical or emotional injuries, and children who abuse their elderly parents—fill the evening news and morning papers. In response, federal, state, and local officials in the health, social services, legal, and educational sectors have developed programs and policies to address concerns about family or intimate violence. A broad range of initiatives has begun in diverse settings to respond to different forms of violence: between parents and children; between spouses; and in other intimate settings, such as gay, lesbian, and nonmarital cohabiting relationships. At the same time, opportunities for the exchange of research findings and for integrating research insights with program experience have been limited. As a result, research has not been effective in guiding policy and program formulation in the area of family violence.

The purpose of the Workshop on Violence and the American Family was to consider the nexus between research and policy initiatives: to identify key issues that need to be addressed in responding to the problem of family violence and to determine the state of research in the field.

The participants were asked to consider key similarities and differences among the various forms of family violence; to identify lessons learned in understanding the causes and consequences of family violence; to highlight some promising approaches in addressing the problems of child abuse, spousal

abuse, elder abuse, and adolescent violence; to consider the implications of family violence for future governmental policies and programs in the areas of health, social services, and criminal justice; and to clarify issues related to family violence that would be appropriate for empirical analysis and policy or research recommendations.

The workshop program was organized so that the discussions would converge on the identification of important dimensions of the problem of family violence. In the opening plenary session, each participant was invited to describe one particular issue or promising development in this field that deserves attention. The participant statements were then examined by three separate working groups, who were asked to determine the areas of greatest opportunity, and need, to be considered in structuring the study of family violence. The participants were also asked to consider the level of empirical research available in these selected areas and to determine whether a scientific review of the available literature was feasible.

The first working group sessions were organized by institutional sector: health, social services, and criminal justice. These groups reviewed interventions and problems identified in the opening plenary session and then identified three items that deserve the most attention in dealing with family violence. Following the presentation of the working group reports in plenary discussion, new groups—each of which included representation from all three institutional sectors—considered all the items and their relative importance. Finally, the plenary group considered the reports of these groups, and their points of convergence and disagreement and summarized the consensus of the workshop participants.

Key Issues

The opening statements of the participants demonstrated the complex dimensions of the problem of family violence. The issues identified by the participants as fundamental in developing responses to family violence can be grouped in three categories: dimensions of the problem; existing interventions; and policies, programs, and research directions.

DIMENSIONS OF THE PROBLEM

- Evaluations of child abuse prevention programs have demonstrated that families who are in greatest need often do not have access to therapeutic intervention services. At-risk families are often marginalized by existing social service and health care systems until an incident of severe abuse or other form of violence occurs.
- Publicly subsidized family counselling and support services are often available only after an incident of family violence has been reported and investigated. Such services are usually provided as part of a mandatory referral program, often within a punitive or coercive context (suggesting, for example, that "if you don't change your behavior, your kids will be taken from your home").
- An early detection process for identifying families at risk of child abuse or neglect or other forms of family violence does not exist. The research base regarding risk factors for family violence does not provide reliable indicators for an effective screening process with sufficient speci-

ficity to avoid large numbers of false positives (that is, falsely identifying families at risk).

- The number of very young, severely battered or neglected children appears to be increasing. The exposure of these children to different types of program interventions (such as battered women's shelters) is also increasing, but the effects of such experiences on children and their families have not been well studied.
- Attention and explanation of documented differences in the cycle of intergenerational transmission of violence are needed. The manner in which certain institutions and communities respond to incidents of violence directed towards young children may differ, depending on the child's race, gender, ethnic origin, and social class. These differences can result in a wide range of disparities and inconsistencies in access to services, as well as in the evaluation of outcomes of interventions.
- The demands of handling different forms of family violence on the court system are enormous and costly. Family violence cases—especially ones involving spousal abuse—are commonly viewed as high-volume, low-significance events in judicial and law enforcement centers. The apparent failure of many police and court interventions in family violence cases (especially spousal abuse cases) has stimulated examinations of the broader dimensions of the problem to identify points of intervention, outside the criminal justice system, that present opportunities for prevention and behavioral change.
- Economic, ethnic, and cultural factors that affect the changing family structure of many American homes need consideration in identifying sources of family violence and methods of intervention. In the absence of parental and community figures who foster the development of social values and behavior, schools are playing an increasingly important role in teaching children social values and behavior important to conflict resolution—especially self-esteem, self-control, and respect for authority.
- Since poverty and unemployment are commonly associated with family violence, the significant decrease in real income of families with young children over the past decade needs special consideration in designing service and policy interventions. In particular, the role of government in supporting families during periods of personal, economic, and social stress requires greater attention in considering the range of preventive measures for family violence.
- Although child and spousal abuse have received increasing attention in family violence research, almost nothing is known about the dimensions, scope, causes, or effects of elder abuse. The characteristics of individuals and families that are associated with abuse of the elderly need consideration, as do the features of interventions designed for other forms of family

violence that might be adapted to this problem. The relationships between different forms of family violence have not been examined.

- The importance of neighborhood factors has only recently received recognition in considering structural, ethnic, economic, and social characteristics of families who experience violent behavior. Certain neighborhoods appear to pose greater risks for these families. The diversity of poor neighborhoods has not been considered in the design of service interventions.
- The unique characteristics of child sexual abuse need special consideration in analyses of family violence. This form of abuse does not appear to have the same risk factors as other forms of violent behavior, especially in considering the role of poverty and social isolation.
- American culture currently fosters a perception that violence and fear-induced compliance are effective in achieving short-term objectives in controlling the behavior of others. Violence within the family is reinforced by reports and images in the media, in entertainment programming, and in sports that implicitly condone or promote the use of violence. Religious and parental experiences with corporal punishment and child discipline also need to be considered in examining attitudes towards the use of violence against family members in American culture.

EXISTING INTERVENTIONS

- The experience with existing services suggests that there are no "quick fixes" to problems of family violence. A comprehensive set of family support programs or a continuum of services to families at different stages of child development does not exist. Although some promising interventions have been developed, the range of existing programs does not offer services that enable parents to deal with stress and violence at all stages of a child's life—from pregnancy and infancy through toddlerhood, early childhood, the preteen years, and adolescence.
- Rigorous evaluations have not been developed for social service interventions that respond to different dimensions of family violence. Such interventions include home visits, family support and family preservation services, day care support, foster care, mandatory reporting for child abuse, and other health, legal, and social services programs. Although many service providers believe that some interventions for family violence seem to work with certain forms of violence or abuse, information about the universality of the effectiveness of such interventions is weak and uncertain. Information is also lacking about the circumstances under which selected interventions appear to work for certain population groups.
- Home visitors' programs (interventions that provide a public health nurse or trained paraprofessional to visit homes and to provide services and

resources designed to improve the quality of parent-child interactions following the birth of a child) represent one promising development that deserves careful evaluation. The existing variation in home visitation programs requires a comprehensive evaluation to identify factors that contribute to the success or limitations of these programs in preventing family violence, especially violence directed at newborns or very young children. In particular, information is needed on what types of special populations (rural, inner city, immigrant, migrant, etc.) are best or poorly served by what types of programs.

- The role of family preservation programs has not been well studied. In particular, more knowledge is needed about the effects of family preservation efforts on parents and children to determine whether intensive family assistance programs can promote the healthy development of children. Furthermore, the role of family preservation in families characterized by multiple forms of abusive behaviors needs to be examined.
- Experimental programs of mandatory arrest for spousal abuse suggest that these programs may be beneficial in some circumstances but that they may cause additional harm in others. Particular attention needs to be given to program features that provide victims with an opportunity to receive an apology and sense of restitution from the offender.
- The response of the courts to spousal abuse needs to deal with two significant obstacles in developing an effective system: victim ambivalence and offender control. Some courts have established innovative efforts focused on these issues that deserve broader evaluation and attention.
- The time-consuming and expensive processing issues associated with handling child and spousal abuse cases have generated a search for solutions outside the legal system. Reform efforts have focused on fostering cooperation among the courts, police programs, and health and social services to design collaborative interventions that can be offered prior to an arrest for or a report of family violence.

POLICIES, PROGRAMS, AND RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

- The role of prevention needs greater emphasis in considering public-sector responses to family violence, although difficulties remain in identifying families at risk for potential violence. Rather than waiting for incidents of violence to trigger the availability of support and assistance, counseling and education services need to build on an integration of existing interventions and to design proactive approaches that are responsive to community needs and feasible with community resources.
- Integrated, coordinated, community-based programs need to combine the successful features of existing categorical services. The concept of "community response" needs to be reconceptualized for family violence.

Programs that move away from fragmented and piecemeal efforts and develop a broader service system based on child and family needs in a neighborhood context need to be encouraged.

- Greater attention needs to be given to the training of physicians and other health professionals in identifying, treating, and preventing family violence. Hospital-based programs are needed to improve the quality of health professional education regarding methods of responding to suspected family violence. Alternative forms of reimbursement for the time and expenses associated with diagnostic tests and involvement in social service or legal proceedings need to be developed for both physical and mental health professionals and educators following a report of suspected abuse.
- The strong association in the research literature between the use of corporal punishment and child abuse suggests that greater attention needs to be given to the prevention of "spanking" and other forms of physical discipline. In particular, health professionals need to be informed about alternative forms of child discipline to guide parental behaviors.
- More knowledge is needed about the sources of motivation for behavioral change, especially violent behavior. Although characteristics of certain program interventions may improve the quality of spousal relationships and parent-child behaviors, a key ingredient for the success of such programs may be the ability of individuals to identify a problem and be willing to change. Basic and applied research on the processes of change for a variety of behaviors (such as alcoholism, smoking, teenage pregnancy) need to be linked to the study of family violence to foster effective program development.
- In developing new programs, caution must be exercised to ensure that new interventions do not replace older, but effective, forms of service and care. Small-scale effective service programs need to be protected when innovative but untested approaches in service delivery are being tested and implemented.
- Public attention to the issue of family violence is just beginning to emerge. A broad constituency and resource base needs to be organized that can support an effective public campaign and highlight key issues related to family violence (such as the proliferation of handguns) that are amenable to change.
- The experience of the public health sector in influencing other areas of personal behavior (such as smoking and drunk driving) suggests that a broad-based publicity campaign is necessary to foster change in individual behaviors linked to family violence. Concerned professionals from a range of fields need collaborative forums and resources to create a public constituency that recognizes the magnitude and significance of the problem of family violence and will support a public health approach as a tool for social reform.

- The knowledge base of program evaluations in the area of family violence is fragmentary and lacks integration. However, research in related fields can help identify factors that need to be considered in transferring promising research or experimental programs to a broad-based implementation effort in social services.
- Useful databases about the scope, severity, and characteristics of different forms of family violence are needed to inform program and policy efforts. Particularly lacking is detailed information about children who abuse their siblings or parents, the nature of elder abuse, and the relationship between different forms of family experiences and family violence.

Promising Programs

In separate working groups, participants identified key elements of programs that can address the range of issues outlined above. The program ideas were organized to reflect the most promising activities in the area of health, social services, and criminal justice that are already under way or under consideration in federal, state, and local governments.

SOCIAL SERVICES

The social services working group identified five tasks that need to be implemented to address the problem of family violence:

1. A set of management and design principles should be articulated as the basis for social interventions in responding to family violence or in offering services to prevent its occurrence. These principles should include such objectives as empowering the client, building on family strengths, using research evaluations of program effectiveness in developing program design, and so forth.
2. A system of universal screening for all new parents is needed to identify areas of family need and also provide voluntary home visitation services for families who would benefit from additional support in dealing with child behavior issues.
3. Comprehensive intervention and prevention systems that can build

on and strengthen formal and informal social networks in diverse neighborhoods are needed at the community level.

4. School programs should include mandatory education for violence prevention.

5. Income supplements are an important means of deterring violence that results from economic stress. New methods of cash payments for families with children should be explored to assist communities during periods of unemployment or economic change.

HEALTH

There is tremendous interest in developing a comprehensive effort to document the extensive costs of injuries that result from family violence and to prevent the occurrence of such injuries. The working group identified three specific initiatives:

1. A national campaign against violence is needed to focus on the health aspects and costs of family violence in our society. Such a campaign would include public examination of research on such issues as gun control, the use of corporal punishment, and violence in the media.

2. The quality of screening and diagnosis of risks and injuries associated with family violence needs to be improved. Health and mental health professionals require both training and encouragement to include discussions of victimization experiences and safety issues (such as "don't shake the baby") in their interviews and examinations of patients.

3. An integrated approach to family violence needs to be promoted by building consensus about what is known regarding the nature of injuries and the health costs associated with spousal violence, child abuse, and abuse of the elderly and the overlap between different forms of family violence. This consensus-building effort could lead to the formation of a constituency that would serve as an advocacy group to educate public officials on the physical and mental health dimensions of family violence.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE

The criminal justice group considered aspects of family violence that relate to law enforcement and the administration of justice. This group identified three issues that represent significant opportunities for addressing the problem of family violence:

1. The effects of the use and enforcement of restraining orders to deal with domestic violence need to be evaluated. New initiatives in offender control have been proposed (such as the use of electronic monitors) that

represent research opportunities to learn more about the effectiveness and effects of monitoring on reducing harm among different population groups.

2. The criminal justice and social service system responses to child abuse and neglect need to be evaluated by studying the availability and effects of court-ordered treatment and the effects of returning abusers to their families, especially in cases of child sexual abuse.

3. New proposals that experiment with the development of a one-family, one-judge court system need to be considered for cases of family violence and juvenile delinquency. Such an approach could ensure continuing oversight and consideration of complex environmental factors that affect family behavior. Such a court system would also highlight the importance of family experiences in the consideration of other types of community violence.

Next Steps:
A Guide to Effective Action

Following consideration of the categorical program plans outlined above, the workshop participants highlighted three steps that could be taken to address the problem of violence in American families. These steps can provide the basis for future research and program plans.

Step 1. Development of a public education campaign would foster understanding of the complex dimensions of family violence. Such a campaign would include national conferences involving researchers, service providers, government officials, and child and other victim advocates, as well as a broad-scale media education effort focused on family violence. The purpose of such a campaign would be to raise the visibility of the scope and significance of family violence, publicize significant research findings, establish agency positions on ways to address the problem, and foster collaborative efforts among health, social service, and criminal justice professionals. Such a campaign would provide a forum that could examine best practices and lessons learned from program efforts in family violence, emphasize the importance of family violence issues in professional education, and encourage community support for further work designed to identify and develop remedies for gaps in the research and knowledge base. The campaign should be broad-based, including a focus on the relationship between family and community violence, the issue of gun control, the role of violence in American culture, and the use of corporal punishment as an aspect of violence in American families.

Step 2. Efforts are needed to bridge the gap that now exists between research resources and policy needs in addressing the problem of family violence. One way to address this gap is to develop rigorous evaluations of public-sector programs designed to treat or reduce incidents of child and spousal abuse and abuse of the elderly. Over the past decade, various types of interventions have been designed, tested on a pilot basis, and implemented in diverse communities to respond to or prevent different forms of family violence. Such efforts include home visitation programs, family preservation and family support services, battered women's shelters, and mandatory arrest programs for domestic violence cases. Yet the evaluation literature on these studies is seriously incomplete. As a result, government officials lack clear conclusions on the strength and limitations of selected efforts, and they are not able to develop programs on a strong base of scientific knowledge. Research that is oriented toward the evaluations of relevant program interventions needs to be identified and highlighted to synthesize and disseminate important lessons learned from past efforts to reduce family violence. More knowledge is also needed about the costs of family violence, in terms of health care, school performance, employment productivity, and so forth.

Step 3. The integration of preventive measures for family violence into a comprehensive, community-based program of family support services across a spectrum of developmental milestones is needed. Although such an integrated program is desirable, its dimensions remain vague and the barriers to implementation are enormous. Further work needs to be stimulated to identify the underlying processes that contribute to family violence and to clarify the extent to which families who are characterized by violence experience other forms of behavioral and social disorders (such as substance abuse, juvenile delinquency, crime, etc.). Research and program development are also needed to identify the essential features of successful comprehensive community-based programs and the extent to which such programs should seek to combine the diverse range of family counselling and family support activities now fragmented in a wide range of categorical programs (including child protective services, Head Start, maternal and child health care, child care, and job training programs).

Some elements of the concept of comprehensive, community-based programs can be encouraged within the existing structure of services, for example, by distributing information about women's emergency shelter programs to hospital emergency room personnel who may treat victims of domestic violence. However, the goal of comprehensive services goes beyond information-sharing and seeks to simplify access to services that address common family needs. Many comprehensive services focus on the mother-child relationship following an infant's birth. But in dealing with family vio-

lence, other developmental periods also have significance (marriage, pregnancy, adolescence, retirement, etc.) that present opportunities for intervention by service providers. An elderly person's registration for Medicare, for example, could represent an appropriate time for health and social service interventions designed to support healthy family functioning.

The dimensions and long-term costs of family violence are just beginning to emerge in American society. By exposing the limitations of scientific knowledge in dealing with this complex problem, new efforts can be designed to develop a broad range of program and policies.

Also of interest

Understanding and Preventing Violence

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